

Parashat Mishpatim, 5779, 2019:

Hashem and Emet

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains the ethically-infused *mitzvah*, “*mi’devar sheker tirchak*” (“Distance yourself from a false matter,” *Sefer Shemot* 23:7, all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*). In his Torah commentary *HaKatav Ve’Kabbalah*, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg (1785-1865) raises a fundamental question regarding the phraseology of this commandment: “Why does the Torah use this indirect terminology, rather than the standard formulation, ‘*lo tedabar sheker* (do not tell a lie)?” I believe his answer informs our understanding of this Divine directive until the present moment:

The reason the Torah changes the text of this commandment and does not say, ‘*lo tedabar sheker*,’ is quite clear. For in truth, there is no more commonly found violation of Torah law than telling a lie. This is illustrated in [*Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 97a] chapter *Chalek*, wherein it states: ‘At first I thought there was no truth in this world.’ Rashi explains that this means, ‘There is no person who always speaks the truth.’ Therefore, the Torah uses the [highly unusual “distance yourself from a false matter”] formulation in order to create an even greater gap between ourselves and this violation. This is similar in kind to the often-cited Rabbinic expression, “Distance yourself from that which is reprehensible and from that which is similar in kind.” (Parashat Mishpatim 23:7, translation and brackets my own)

The Maharal of Prague (Rabbi Judah ben Bezalel Loewe, 1520-1609) underscores the importance of the Talmudic phrase cited by Rav Mecklenburg, “At first I thought there was no truth in this world.” He suggests that its primary purpose is to stress the value of *emet* (truth):

One must know that the essence of this expression is to make known the great value of *emet*, for everything that follows the truth is fitting to be permanent in nature. As our Sages taught us, “The truth remains, whereas a lie will not endure.” (*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 104a) This is the case, since truth is fitting for existence, and falsehood is destined for destruction. (*Chidushei Aggadot, Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 104a, translation my own)

In the Maharal's estimation, *emet* is one of the constitutive elements of existence itself, for only that which is built upon truth will continue to endure. Little wonder, then, that the prophet Zechariah adjured our nation: "Speak the truth each one with his neighbor; truth, and judgment of peace you shall judge in your cities." (8:16) Perhaps most important of all, when we seek to live lives that embody *emet*, we are emulating the Almighty Himself. As the prophet Yirmiyahu proclaimed: "...the L-rd G-d is *emet* (true)..." (10:10) The Talmudic sage, Rabbi Avun interprets Yirmiyahu's use of the term, "*emet*," in the following manner: "For He is the [eternally] living G-d and the King for all time." (*Talmud Yerushalmi*, Vilna, *Berachot* 1:5) Rabbi Chanina further explicates the relationship that obtains between Hashem and *emet* when he teaches us, "The seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, is *emet*." (*Talmud Bavli*, *Shabbat* 55a) In other words, *emet* is one of the markers of Hashem's presence in the world, and, therefore, the standard by we should judge our daily actions.

May the time come soon and, in our days, when the entire world will live in truth and recognize the one true Master of the Universe. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

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*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.